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NEWSLETTER

Jessica Grose

It's Getting Harder for Kids to Find Places to Play

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One of my daughters loves tennis; she's always scanning our neighborhood parks for a brick wall she can volley against without accidentally pelting other kids with balls. She does this even though we have public tennis courts that are about five blocks from our place. Those courts may as well not exist, though, because they are inaccessible to most kids.

First, you need to get a permit from the New York City Parks Department to even walk on the court. The permit costs $100 for adults for the season (and $10 for kids under 18). Some of the more popular courts in the five boroughs have online reservations, which cost $15 per hour of play. The court near us has no online reservations, but appears to have some kind of in-person sign-up that is filled before 6 a.m.

In my decade of living near this park, I have never seen the tennis courts free, or any minor playing there, and the idea that a child could use it on her own is frankly ludicrous. We have the money to pay for access to a private court once a week, so we do — and it costs a lot more than $15 an hour. Getting to play a sport you love shouldn't be contingent on your family having that kind of expendable income.

Our experience is illustrative of a problem with youth sports that I have written about before and appears to be getting worse: Kids are getting priced out of play, and the upkeep of parks around the country is in jeopardy. A Morning Consult poll published in September showed that kids with household incomes of over $100,000 were on average twice as likely to play any of the 13 sports tracked by the poll as their less wealthy counterparts. Local parks and recreation programs tend to be the most affordable options for organized play, yet lack of facilities like tennis courts is among the most cited challenges for offering youth sports at a reasonable cost.

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When facilities and green spaces aren't available, they don't just hurt kids who want to play on a team. They also hurt children who want to move their bodies or play a pickup game with their friends without the intrusion of adults. This deficit has lasting effects. There's good evidence that adults who played sports in their youth maintain higher levels of physical activity as adults.

A paucity of park facilities may seem like a small problem to focus on when the government is shut down. But the recent trajectory of federal parks funding is an example of how the stinginess and dysfunction of the Trump administration could ruin an area of rare, recent bipartisan compromise.

For a bit of context: The majority of parks and recreation funding across the country comes from state and local taxes, but that funding took a major hit during the 2008 recession, and did not completely recover in some places. Parks took another blow in the early days of Covid, according to the National Recreation and Park Association, when two-thirds of parks and recreation officials reported in June 2020 that they had slashed their budgets because of declining tax revenue. This was especially devastating at a time when outdoor activities were the safest way for people to see one another.

But these cuts provided a warning: States and the federal government realized how important parks and recreation were — both for the health of citizens and also the economy. Outdoor recreation generated $1.2 trillion in economic output, and employed five million people in 2023, according to the nonprofit Outdoor Recreation Roundtable.

In August 2020, the Great American Outdoors Act, which authorized $1.6 billion in annual federal funding for improving infrastructure and expanding "recreation opportunities in national parks and other public lands," passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, and was signed into law by President Trump during his first term. "These infrastructure updates will preserve our most important national treasures and give more American families opportunities to explore the great outdoors," wrote Mary B. Neumayr, who was the chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality at the time.

The second Trump administration is singing a different tune. The proposed budget for the 2026 fiscal year includes $900 million in cuts for the operation of the National Park Service, $77 million in cuts for its national recreation and preservation program, and $73 million in cuts for construction. This means trails and playing fields at national parks may not get the maintenance they need to remain safe and usable for families, and that states will have to foot more of the bills. According to the Outdoors Alliance for Kids, a nonpartisan advocacy group, "The budget also targets several popular and beloved programs that connect children with opportunities to learn and play in the outdoors and get to know their local parks and watersheds."

This year the administration also clawed back grant money that the federal government had already promised. For instance, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act canceled over $100 million allocated for the QueensWay, a project to convert an abandoned railway corridor in central Queens into a linear park. If fully completed, the park would serve 245,000 residents and 28 public school communities, according to the Trust for Public Land, which pushed for the project.

And it isn't just blue states that are affected. In July, the Environmental Protection Agency terminated $20 million in funding for a trail system in Chattanooga, Tenn. The Department of Transportation has also cut grants for bike lanes and mixed-use trails, which are popular in both red and blue states.

This kind of defunding doesn't hurt just kids. Parks are some of the last "third places" we have outside home and work, where "people of all political persuasions like spending time," said Will Klein, the associate director of parks research at the Trust for Public Land. According to a survey that the trust did this year, "65 percent of big-city U.S. adults reported having at least one positive conversation in a park or other outdoor public space with someone they previously did not know."

This is why I want my kid to have access to a public court: It will broaden the world for her for her entire life, rather than shrink it to those who can also afford to pay to play. To make America healthy again in body and in spirit, fully funding parks is a great way to start.

End Notes

- **All I need in this life of sin:** I started reading "Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde," a 2009 book by Jeff Guinn. Guinn is one of my favorite nonfiction authors; his biography of Charles Manson is a must for true-crime lovers. One of the hallmarks of Guinn's work is that he is unsparing about describing the crushing poverty that Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker experienced growing up in the slums of West Dallas, Texas, and the horrifying treatment Barrow received when he was incarcerated, before he committed his most famous crimes. Guinn doesn't excuse Bonnie and Clyde's behavior, but he makes it clear that their environment did not provide any legitimate opportunities for poor and clever children, either.

Feel free to drop me a line about anything here.

Jessica Grose is an Opinion writer for The Times, covering family, religion, education, culture and the way we live now.

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